

## Eyeballing Libya - al-Qa'ida's New Foothold?

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**Policy Paper**

**April 2011**

**Eyeballing Libya  
– al-Qa’ida’s New Foothold?**

**Nico Prucha**

“It is our opinion that the revolutions that are shaking the thrones of dictators are good for the Muslims, good for the mujahidin and bad for the imperialists of the West and their henchmen in the Muslim world. We are very optimistic and have great expectations of what is to come.”

- Yahya Ibrahim<sup>1</sup>

The ongoing conflict in Libya is a chance well perceived by al-Qa’ida (AQ) to finally gain a foothold in a country, whose leader in the past was highly successful by extreme violent means<sup>2</sup> to suppress any opposition, particularly any Islamist or jihadist inspired opponents. Mu’ammar al-Qadhafi has firmly ruled – and exploited – Libya ever since he gained power in 1969.<sup>3</sup> The conflict in Libya as of now can be considered as a tribal war over regional/provincial control, with the epicenter being in Benghazi where peaceful protestors had endured harsh violent reactions by army, police and mercenary units loyal to Qadhafi. Perhaps as a logical consequence, Libyans in the eastern part of the country started defending themselves and as a result a civil-war scenario has since unfolded.

Unlike other revolutions, particularly in Tunisia, Libya now is doomed being a war-zone, with NATO flying bombing missions in order to prevent a massacre of Qadhafi’s troops should they be able to regain control of Benghazi and other rebel strongholds. Reports of massive human rights abuse in the town of Misrata have since the outbreak of the revolution in mid February been documented.<sup>4</sup> For AQ and the jihadi online sphere in general, the violent outbreak in Libya is a treasure grove. When the waves of social and mostly peaceful protestors set from Tunisia to Egypt, the typical jihadi propaganda machinery seemed incapable of adequately responding and now desperately tries to claim each and every revolution as their cause, for which they are conducting military and terrorist operations.

### **New developments – the need to respond**

With the start of the social unrest in Tunisia which turned into riots against the regime of Ben Ali that subsequently led to his ousting in early 2011, the north African branch of al-Qa’ida<sup>5</sup> was quick to respond when its leader Abu Mus’ab Abd al-Wudud issued a message to

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<sup>1</sup> Inspire, number 5, p.5, “Protest Focus”, published on 30 March 2011 – “Featuring a Special Section: THE REVOLUTION”, <http://www.archive.org/download/INSPIREn5/inspire5.pdf> (30.03.2011 - applies to all referenced links, unless otherwise noted).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/06/world/africa/06libya.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/06/world/africa/06libya.html?_r=1)

<sup>3</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country\\_profiles/819291.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/819291.stm)

<sup>4</sup> <http://worldblog.msnbc.msn.com/news/2011/04/05/6413466-miseries-abound-for-besieged-libyans->

<sup>5</sup> The al-Qa’ida branch in North Africa was established early 2007 after merging with the Algerian-bound Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) and now calls itself al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

“support and aid the *intifada* of our people in Tunisia.” By simply terming it an *intifada*, the message implies a popular uprising with the potential of escalating violence on all sides. In this message, al-Wudud claimed that the people finally had disposed the “Pharaoh” and are on the verge of establishing an Islamic state, ruled by sharia-law and thus liberating the Muslims – independently of any reality in mainly secular Tunisia. This is the primary propagated goal of AQ that must be implemented for all Islamic countries. Showing the nature of AQ in general, al-Wudud was only able to offer violent means to peaceful and mostly secular protestors when he said “send us your sons, so we can train them in handling weapons and in order to acquire military knowledge.” AQ had hoped – and is now attempting similar ends in Libya – to hijack a legitimate protest movement with the claim AQ is a avant-garde for the liberation of Muslims, having fought against these regimes for decades. In a similar move, the Arabic-language magazine *Sada al-Malahim* of the Yemeni AQ branch<sup>6</sup> called out to Muslims in Tunisia.

This extreme violent AQ department, entrenched in a intensifying guerrilla war against the Yemeni government, fell in line with jihadi propaganda stating that Tunisia is somewhat of a first domino in a jihadist dream world of reestablishing the Islamic Caliphate.

With the address to the “People of Tunisia” the Yemeni jihad magazine clearly propagates that “your jihad, your revolution is about the return of an Islamic state, based on justice, in order to drive the infidel secularists and the democrats into hell.”<sup>7</sup>

As AQ’s agenda consists of ultimately re-establishing the Islamic Caliphate, it has propagated in the past of having already founded parts. This includes the “Islamic State of Iraq”, the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” (in unison with the Taliban) or territories in Somalia, where the propagated implementation of Islamic rule shall serve as the first step in proclaiming another Islamic state.

Just as the media of jihad attempt to capitalize on the events in Tunisia, and now Egypt as well, the North African AQ department is highly keen to issue statements of support to “our people in Libya.” Any damage to any Arab regime, defined by the jihadists as tyrannical rulers or idols is branded by jihadist media as a victory and as a part of AQ’s wider agenda.

Every Arab revolution is a potential win for AQ and hijacked by the propaganda of the jihadists who attempt to picture a jihadization of the current unrest. With the intensifying of violence in Libya and the current airstrikes conducted by NATO, al-Qa’ida has regained some attention and openly seeks to support the military jihad against Qadhafi. The NATO intervention is considered yet another “politically-motivated adventure of the western

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Qa’ida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP had been founded in early 2003 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and has reemerged in Yemen in January 2009 under the same name after successful Saudi counter-terrorist actions in the Kingdom.

<sup>7</sup> Sada al-Malahim no. 16, p.3. The magazine was published 15 February 2011.

countries” who are “colonialists [that] do not want a solution for this country (...) but rather have plans to weaken this Islamic country in a war of attrition and then occupy its oil reserves through direct invasions.”<sup>8</sup> Following the basic concept of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, the airstrikes against the Qadhafi regime by NATO are portrayed by jihadist scholar Abu Muslim al-Jaza’iri as useful for the cause in Libya.<sup>9</sup> This serves the purpose of the revolution, however, only for as long as NATO is “targeting Qadhafis troops without entering the Libyan territory [with ground forces].” But the western intervention is naturally not being trusted and thus the west has a history of “alleging to intervene for the protection of innocent civilians while they are the ones slaughtering civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and are having innocents butchered by supporting the occupants of Palestine.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Libyan Factor**

Libyans have been active at the frontlines of jihad in the past decades. While numbers tend to differ, it must be noted that some of the most outstanding AQ operatives and leaders had been from Libya and are currently in a prominent position. Local jihad groups such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) never had any chance of actually gaining any grounds inside of Libya with the regime of Qadhafi in place. In a perhaps logical move, most Libyans jihadists set out to Afghanistan in the 1980s<sup>11</sup>, participated in the Balkan wars in the 1990s<sup>12</sup> and are now, as of 2011, represented among the core leadership of AQ in Afghanistan/Pakistan. When the US-Army in the Iraqi town of Sinjar found documents of 700 jihadi foreign fighters who joined AQ in Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007, 591 of these records provided the country of origin. These files, known as the Sinjar Files, indicate that roughly 250 fighters had been from Saudi Arabia with Libya ranking as number two (about 100 fighters) followed by Yemen and Algeria. According to the Sinjar Files, 19 percent of the fighters came from Libya, and Libyans ranked number one in regard of fighters per capita.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps a surge of Libyan aspirants of jihad was set in motion after the announced merger of LIFG with AQ. This merger was expressed by the Libyan AQ leader and military

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<sup>8</sup> Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding the foreign intervention and civilian casualties in Libya, 20.03.2011, [www.alemarah-iea.net](http://www.alemarah-iea.net)

<sup>9</sup> Fatwa “Libya after the entry of the Crusader”, answered by Abu Muslim al-Jaza’iri, March 28, 2011, [www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws)

<sup>10</sup> Fatwa “is the entry of the west in Libya legitimate?”, answered by Abu Mundhir al-Shanqiti, March 28, 2011, [www.tawheed.ws](http://www.tawheed.ws).

<sup>11</sup> For one account of a Libyan doctor (Salih al-Libi) who fought and served as a medic in the 1980s jihad against Soviet troops and the Afghan National Army: Prucha, Nico: ‘Abdallah ‘Azzams Outlook for Jihad in 1988 – “al-Jihad between Kabul and Jerusalem”, p.11 ff, <http://www.rieas.gr/images/nicos2.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Qatari, Hamd / Al-Madani, Majid (eds.): Min qisas al-shuhada al-arab fi Busna wa-l Hursk, p.58ff, p.115ff, <http://saaid.net/book/133.zip>.

<sup>13</sup> Felter, Joseph / Fishman, Brian: al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq – a First Look at the Sinjar Records, Harmony Project, CTC at West Point, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/CTCForeignFighter.19.Dec07.pdf>

instructor Abu 'l-Layth al-Libi in November 2007,<sup>14</sup> who would be killed soon after in a US-drone strike.<sup>15</sup>

The outbreak of violence in Libya conveniently suits the jihadist propaganda. Finally, one of the fiercest enemies, the regime of Qadhafi, does not 'simply' bow to the demands of a massive social movement. It must be noted that all social movements parallel to their protests and demonstrations had been keen to keep the world updated via the use of social media outlets such as twitter, Facebook, blogs and YouTube. When the Libyan town of Misrata was affected by heavy fighting, AQ broadcasted a speech by Attiyatullah who is active inside the jihadi media spectrum since many years, both as a writer<sup>16</sup> and as a jihadist authority appearing in a number of videos.<sup>17</sup> In what can be most likely interpreted as a typical blunt propaganda move, Attiyatullah issued a message entitled "Greetings to our People in Libya" on 25 February 2011, stating his clear, full name for the first time: Jamal Ibrahim Ishtiyayy al-Misrati. By this, Attiyatullah implies being "one of you" from Misrata and subsequently gives out advice to the "sons of the Islamic nation" in order to succumb and dispose al-Qadhafi and his regime. Clearly, the regime of Mu'ammār al-Qadhafi is yet another defined non-Islamic government, ruled by an unjust tyrant, an idol (*taghut*) led by disbelief (*kufir*) and is part of a greater plan to continue the suppression of Muslims. As noted in an earlier message, Attiyatullah, who is "a Libyan member of al-Qaeda since 1989 [and] who is now based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region (...) sought to appropriate the recent North African uprisings for al-Qaeda."<sup>18</sup> When the presumed merger of LIFG with AQ did not create a foothold in Libya, elements such as Attiyatullah now perceive the situation as a new chance with the hope to "directly inspire Libyans to create their own local version of al-Qaeda."

A similar tactic applies to AQ's 'number three', Abu Yahya al-Libi.

For several years, Abu Yahya al-Libi has been frequently broadcasting filmed sermons and published books from the frontlines of jihad. Being a Libyan as well, Abu Yahya also issued a

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<sup>14</sup> Camille Tawil, Libyan Islamists Back Away from al-Qaeda Merger in Reconciliation with Qaddafi Regime, June 18, 2009,

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35147](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35147)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1978204/posts>

<sup>16</sup> Some of his writings can be retrieved here: <http://tawhed.ws/a?a=atiyatal>

<sup>17</sup> The most recent one, a filmed sermon (*khutba*), was released by as-Sahab on 14 March 2011. "The Importance of the Sanctity of Muslim Blood" was published a few days later published in English by the Global Islamic Media Front.

He, for example, was featured in the notorious "Reeh al-janna" series, praising killed Abu 'l-Layth al-Libi as a military instructor and a combat veteran in the fields of jihad.

<sup>18</sup> Benotman, Noman / Brandon, James: Briefing paper: The jihadist threat in Libya, 24 March 2011, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/images/stories/pdfs/libya24march11.pdf>

message “to our people in Libya.”<sup>19</sup> In this speech, he emphasized – as in other jihadi media regarding the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt – the will of the people to rid themselves of any form of tyranny and oppression, he tries to paint Libya as a new theatre of jihadi actions. In the jihadists worldview, there can be “no dignity, no honor without sacrifice”, al-Libi claims “the freedom of the Muslim people in Libya consists in the true and sincere implementation of sharia-law, the conduct of justice, humanity, mercy and honor.” The only solution, as usual according to the jihadi sources, is sought in the installation of a proclaimed religious habitus, independently of the reality on the ground. Al-Libi appeals on the legitimacy of ousting Qadhafi while portraying the elements of AQ as a kind of ‘avant-garde’ who are fighting for the exact same cause – but without popular support, until now. With the increase of violence by Qadhafi, Abu Yahya stresses, that the “wish of the Mujahideen for a long time had been to incite the Islamic community and of protecting it with the appeal for jihad.” Only by battle can freedom be obtained – freedom in the jihadists’ sense means living under the sharia-law as interpreted by jihadist sources. As the west in the recent decades has created and installed vassal-governments and rulers, all of who are subjected in the jihadists’ worldview belonging to a scurrile conspiracy,<sup>20</sup> neither the US nor the EU have any real interest in seeing governments serving their interests in the region removed. Furthermore, “these uprisings [in the Middle East] have uncovered the fact that western governments do not know anything else besides their interests and those of their people”, even though western, democratic governments “say to the uprising people, who have been conquered for a long time by criminals, ‘we stand with you.’” Abu Yahya has repeated this a number of times in this message. “We are saying this is a lesson for our Muslim people, who will not attain the freedom or dignity they want and the comfort they seek except by feeling their power of themselves.”

The jihadists are both supporting and exploiting the Arab spring<sup>21</sup> while in the case of Libya three vital factors for the jihadi propaganda are at play.

One major threat is the North African AQ department. They mainly operate out of Mali, Chad, Niger and Algeria and are active in channeling weapons and making money by frequently kidnapping westerners. At this stage it may be assumed that fighters are active in Libya with the ambition of sending more foreign fighters to Libya to actively support the war against Qadhafi. This could lead to the widening of the conflict and yet another long-term battlefield in the Arab world. Furthermore, this will perhaps lead to new, inspiring and highly appealing

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<sup>19</sup> Kalimat al-shaykh al-mujahid Abu Yahya al-Libi ila ahlin fi Libiyya, as-Sahab (12.03.2011).

<sup>20</sup> “Christian-Crusader-Zionist-Shiite” descriptions of secret alliances are found frequently in the jihadist writings and videos. For an up-to-date example, consult the 353 page long treatise by senior jihadi scholar al-Majid: Abd al-Majid, Abd al-Majid: al-Sira’ al-islami al-sahiu-salibi – al-wajha al-haqiqi li l-sira’, *Silsilat bina’ al-shakhsiyya al-muslima* (4), Global Islamic Media Front (2011).

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.economist.com/node/18486089?utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://www.economist.com/node/18486089?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter)

jihad propaganda and videos by an already established AQ group who at the same time has the possibility to acquire modern weapon technology from Qadhafi's caches.

Another main factor is the narrative of grievances. The jihadi rhetoric and pictures are filled with grievances, committing themselves to sacrifice everything to provide security to Muslim civilians. As it was already visible in Tunisia, pictures of killed protestors quickly entered the jihadi propaganda to underline the criminal nature of regimes AQ is fighting against. And now, finally, the population is rising up as well for the same cause. In Libya, particularly within the rebel held territories in the East as of now, pictures of killed civilians and mutilated corpses, allegedly civilians tortured to death by Qadhafi's mercenaries, are already at work with the call to provide support. A call that AQ propagates to answer.

And finally, the modus and the role model of the Mujahideen are at play. With armed, disorganized and guerrilla styled men in Libya fighting with Kalashnikovs and Rocket Propelled Grenades against a technical superior and well organized army, the outlets of the jihadi media define them already as Mujahideen. Pictures are being broadcasted from the battlefields in Libya of armed men praying before combat – what may be a intercultural and a natural habit. This, however, is something that AQ is reclaiming for itself. Therefore, the propaganda of AQ is calling out to “raise the flag of Jihad in the Muslim land of Libya”<sup>22</sup> indicating that jihadist ideology is an essential part of the Muslim fighters in Libya as in Afghanistan. The pictures from inside of Libya are thus branded with the rebels being perceived within the jihadist media as re-enacting AQ and thereby as living the ‘Islamic’ definition of jihadist endeavors – again, AQ is far from reality, but may gain a foothold by its active and supportive role in East Libya if they succeed in establishing themselves this time properly with local jihadist and with the logistical and ideological backing of the transnational active AQ network in North Africa in place.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.ansarullah.co.cc/en/2011/03/04/our-brothers-in-libya/>